

CPYRGHT

A BOOK FOR TODAY

By DONALD MINTZ

Legendary Figure of Old Frontier

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GREAT WESTERNER, The Story of Kit Carson. By Bernice Blackwelder. End-sheet map by Clare Ford. Illus., 373 pp. (The Caxton Printers; \$6.)

Among the Western heroes who have lived through American history and myth, there are many who were in fact more colorful than heroic. Kit Carson is not among these, for he was a man of genuine stature and nearly incredible accomplishment.

He served as guide on three of Fremont's expeditions to the West. Then, in 1846 he found himself arbitrarily joined to the forces of the then Col. Stephen Kearny. As a result he was involved in the absurd yet tragic California campaign in the Mexican War, the subsequent squabbles about who captured the territory and ultimately Fremont's court martial.

Then he turned rancher. But in 1854 he became an Indian agent—apparently a good one. Finally there was service in the Civil War and the Indian campaigns in the New Mexico area. Carson died in 1868 at the age of 59.

He dictated his autobiography shortly before his death. In addition there are a number of books about him including a biography that appeared in 1955.

Now in "Great Westerner" Bernice Blackwelder has gone over the ground again, apparently with the intention of producing a readable and popular but solidly documented book of moderate length.

She has not succeeded. It requires more than good intentions to convey the excitement of border warfare and a sense of the hardships of the frontier.

THIS SORT of thing will not do: "Kit had another hair's-breadth escape while running to help Cotton Mansfield, who was pinned under when his horse fell. Seeing half a dozen Indians starting for his scalp, Cotton cried out: 'Tell Old Gabe that Old Cotton's gone.' Kit, shouting for the others to surround the helpless man, jumped from his horse in time to save him. Four warriors were shot from their mounts as the trappers converged around Mansfield. Doc Newell swung down from his saddle to filch another top-knot but the touch of his knife..." But why go on? But beyond this, the whole story is seen through a haze of often impenetrable confusion. Characters come and go apparently serenely confident that they will be recognized by all.

The essential political background is indicated fitfully and without feeling for the distinction between the crucial and the trivial. It is almost as if small chunks of assorted encyclopedia articles had been pushed into the narrative at random.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is mentioned but not identified as the agreement that ended the Mexican War. There is no serious treatment of the Indian policy the results of which occupied Carson for so many years of his life. The political boundaries of the western territories are never indicated, and there is no discussion of the complex background of the Civil War in the Southwest except for the Gadsden Purchase and the motives behind it.

THE DOCUMENTATION is capricious and seemingly indiscriminating. Footnotes follow trivia while relatively important material stands free and unencumbered.

Mrs. Blackwelder gives no indication that she is aware of the necessity of arranging sources according to a hierarchy of importance and reliability.

Carson's manner of speech varies according to the source of the quotation. One moment he speaks genuine TV Western, the next the rotund cadences of the middle of the 19th century.

Mrs. Blackwelder has had a varied career. For a time she taught singing at Central College in Fayette, Missouri. Then she was an active musician in Chicago. She spent several years with the CIA and now she devotes full time to historical research and travel.

But it seems that nowhere along the line has she acquired either the ability to organize a book or a conception of historical method.